DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 322 SP 037 203

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TITLE Teaching Student Teachers How To Promote Cultural Awareness in Urban and Suburban Schools.
PUB DATE Feb 97
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (49th, Phoenix, AZ, February 26-March 1, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Awareness; Curriculum Development; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Multicultural Education; Preservice Teacher Education; Student Teacher Attitudes; *Student Teachers; *Student Teaching; *Suburban Schools; Teaching Methods; *Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study compared ways student teachers in urban and suburban schools learned how to analyze school communities and create curricula that would affirm the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. Ten student teachers participated in the study, six in an urban cluster site and four in a suburban cluster site. Participants attended a weekly seminar; kept journals in which they documented their practice, observations, and reflections; and developed lessons to teach about other cultures or strategies that addressed the diverse needs of their students. The six students in the urban cluster site all reported that they had a positive experience and increased interest in teaching in an urban school. The suburban cluster site did not provide student teachers much exposure to racial diversity, and the student teachers questioned whether they would be prepared to teach in an urban school. In the urban sites the student teachers focused more on developing strategies that met the needs of their students' different cultural learning styles; in the suburban sites, student teachers developed lessons that focused on teaching about other cultures rather than on learning styles and specific teaching techniques. Overall, student teachers appeared to be more accepting of working with children from other cultures and teaching about other cultures than what has been reported in previous studies on student teachers' views about multiculturalism and diversity. (ND)

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Teaching Student Teachers How to Promote Cultural Awareness in Urban and Suburban Schools

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education in Phoenix on February 28, 1997.

SP036203

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to compare how student teachers in urban and suburban schools learn how to analyze school communities and create curricula that affirm the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students. They will determine to what degree the present curriculum promotes awareness of all children's cultures and facilitates their students' awareness of other cultures. During the semester they will design and implement their own lessons that accomplish these goals.

Background

There is a concern about the growing gap between the number of minority students and minority teachers in public schools. The number of minority students has increased and will continue to grow well into the next century, while the opposite trend is occurring among minority teachers. Few students in teacher education programs come from urban areas and only 15% of student express interest in teaching in an urban area (Zeichner, 1994). Thus, we must extend our potential pool of urban teachers beyond minority and urban students in order to staff all classrooms in urban public schools. Currently there are not enough minority and urban teacher education students to meet this need. Hence we must begin to develop ways to prepare all teacher education students regardless of race and background to teach in urban schools.

Most education students' home backgrounds and prior experiences have not prepared them to teach in urban schools (Holm & Johnson, 1994). They readily admit that they do not know how to interact with children who have different ethnic or social backgrounds than their own. Some students hold inaccurate gender, class, and racial perceptions of groups that they do not

hold membership in (Wolfee, 1996). Thus, they are reluctant to participate in volunteer opportunities or field assignments that involve children from different backgrounds. Other education students are in denial about group differences and see no need to learn about other cultures by interacting with them (Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

In either case they are not prepared for, or attracted to urban teaching at the outset of their teacher education programs. However, some education students are exposed to new information in their education courses that challenge their misperceptions and increase their interest in other cultural groups (Wolfee, 1996). Due to a university requirement they may take a course in a specific ethnic studies program and increase their understanding of another culture. Also many teacher education programs offer a separate course in multicultural education that focuses on the instructional strategies that are effective with children of different cultures. In social foundations of education courses some students work through their prejudicial views developed in childhood through writing and analyzing their cultural autobiographies. Used properly the cultural autobiography can be a powerful tool for understanding one's behaviors and emotions around racial issues (Zeichner, 1994). For many students who are psychologically open to interacting with other cultures these experiences in courses can have a positive effect on their willingness to work with children from diverse backgrounds. These students will be motivated to apply what they have learned in their courses and seek out an urban placement (Milk, 1994).

For these students the field experience can enrich the information they have received in their courses. They can now construct a more meaningful definition of diversity or multiculturalism. In addition, they can share information about other cultures in their lessons, as well as relate to students

and parents in ethnically appropriate ways (Milk, 1994). Their courses have prepared them to view diversity in a positive way that leads to culturally rewarding experiences for the education students, as well as the elementary students.

In contrast, some education students have not participated in courses that prepare them for ethnically diverse settings and are assigned to an urban school for their field placement as a program requirement. These students initially have a negative view of urban schools and would rather be placed in suburban schools. However, after their urban field experience most students report positive feelings about their field placement. It was much better than they expected (Wolfee, 1996).

In both cases urban field placements for education students have increased the likelihood that they will seek a position in an urban school upon graduation. Some insist on only applying for positions in urban schools.

While we have identified the factors that encourage students to teach in urban schools we have not been as effective in equipping these teachers with the tools and skills they need to survive in urban schools. Many novice teachers enter urban schools ready to apply the concepts and strategies they acquired in their teacher education programs and they soon become discouraged by more experienced colleagues, principals, and their students. Instead of changing the school culture with their innovative methods and techniques they succumb to the status quo (Regan & Hannah, 1993). They lower their expectations for their students and present uninspired material in traditional teacher directed formats. Then they become frustrated because students are not achieving and they move on to a "better" school or profession.

To avoid this pattern we need to explicitly teach preservice teachers how to change the existing structures in urban schools. As preservice teachers they should be exposed to inquiry models that encourage them to question everything and be involved in action research projects in which they experience facilitating change in schools (Noffke & Brennan, 1991; Zeichner, 1987). Their preparation in how to facilitate change is just as important to their success in urban schools as their preparation in multicultural education.

Method

Ten student teachers participated in this study. In this particular teacher education program, groups of student teachers are assigned to various schools that are designated as cluster sites. I have chosen to study an urban cluster site with 6 student teachers and a suburban cluster site with 4 student teachers. The weekly student teacher seminar is held at each cluster site and during this time student teachers discuss their teaching practice. On one occasion I held a joint seminar with the urban and suburban cluster sites and student teachers shared information about their backgrounds, their current placements in regard to diversity, and their future plans. This seminar was taped and transcribed for later analysis.

The student teachers also kept journals in which they documented their practice, observations, and reflections. These journal entries were analyzed to determine the differences in diversity at both sites. Lastly, the students developed lessons to teach about other cultures or strategies that address the diverse needs of their students. The student teachers displayed their lesson plans and strategies in their student teaching portfolios. These

portfolio items were analyzed to determine their level of understanding about multicultural education.

Results

Student Teacher Backgrounds

The student teachers in this study had a range of backgrounds from homogeneous to integrated. Six of the students grew up in all white, middle class, suburban communities with little or no interaction with other cultures or classes. Three other student teachers had similar backgrounds, however they had extracurricular experiences such as: dance classes, gymnastics, and missionary work that gave them significant contact with other cultures and classes, as well as opportunities to build relationships with people from backgrounds different from their own. The only student who had a truly integrated background was a middle class, African-American student who attended integrated K-12 private schools.

Field Experience

Six student teachers were placed in the urban cluster site. They all reported that they had a positive experience and it increased their interest in teaching in an urban school. One student teacher became more aware of Middle Eastern culture and customs through his interactions with Middle Eastern students and parents.

> *I ask them questions and they are willing to tell me. The parents come in the classroom and I wasn't too sure about the different dialects and how they work and he was from the Persian Gulf area. I'm not sure which country. We have Ahmin in the classroom. Also totally different dialect and how that works out, how things are treated. How he goes to a girl and even today one of the girls wanted to help him*

with reading. There was now way he was going to have a girl help him.

Another student teacher explained how he is more comfortable in the urban school now than he was before his internship.

Teaching here would be all right. It's not what I had planned. If I was going to stay in this area, I wouldn't have a problem with it. It would not be something I would avoid.

For another student the experience challenged previously held negative perceptions.

I would definitely not look down on the kids the way my pre-internship teacher did. I think they were capable of a lot more than what they did because he was yelling at them all the time. Because he had such low expectations.

The student teachers in the suburban cluster site admitted that their internship experience did not give them much exposure to racial diversity. As a result, they questioned whether they would be prepared to teach in an urban school.

I would not be happy in some school in Detroit or somewhere I'm not used to. In a way I don't think I would be ready for that. Not that I would never ever do it. Certainly not in the near future. I try to have an open mind.

However the experience in a racially homogenous school increased their awareness of other differences.

I'm a little bit more sensitive to maybe not different cultures, but different differences in general. I get a little worked up about differences in classes. I try not to let that be a focus.

The suburban field experience made others value the diversity that exists in their lives.

> *I think I'm really lucky to have had some of the experiences that I've had. It's made me realize that all children are the same. They need lots of love and attention.*

Lessons and Strategies in Diversity

In the urban cluster site the student teachers focused more on developing strategies that met the needs of the cultural learning styles of all children. They arranged field trips to provide all children with a similar experiential background on abstract topics. They utilized cooperative learning and peer tutoring techniques to teach children how to work together. They developed goals and objectives that reflected their commitment to value each child's perspectives and ideas. They had discussions with their students on the differences and similarities that exist among their classmates. One student teacher taught units on other cultures such as Native Americans and Koreans. None of the student teachers developed lessons on African-Americans. The school is composed of 51% African- Americans and 7% other minorities. Perhaps student teachers did not feel comfortable teaching students about a content area that their students may have been more knowledgeable about than they were or they did not see a need to educate African-American students about African-American culture.

In the suburban cluster site the student teachers developed lessons that focused on teaching about other cultures. They taught lessons on Native American culture, their food, crafts, music, writing, and rituals. Another student teacher did a series of lessons in which students traced their own ancestry to their countries of origin. Overall, the student teachers in the suburban cluster did not focus on learning styles and specific teaching

techniques unless they were addressing differences in abilities. These interns seemed more intent on teaching about and exposing students to a variety of cultural experiences to increase their awareness of cultural differences. It was important for the student teachers in the suburban cluster site to teach their students about other cultures, even though there were few cultures other than European cultures represented in their school and community.

Case Study: The Road Not Taken

During this study I was fortunate to be able to learn a tremendous amount about the ten student teachers, particularly their backgrounds, reasons why they chose the profession and future plans. My interactions with them were extremely interesting and educational. They gave me a glimpse of a world that was very different from my own world. I am an African-American female from a working class background. Most of the student teachers were white females from upper middle class backgrounds. However, their similarities ended there. For a variety of reasons they each sought to develop their own identities separate from the privileged world their parents' success afforded them, except for one. She was unique. She clung to the security of her privileged background. She frequently created crises in her life that required help and attention from her parents. She never pursued any experiences that involved interactions with other cultures. She avoided doing field work in urban areas and was pleased that her internship placement was in a suburban school. She once said she would have cried if she was placed in an urban school. She definitely plans to seek a job in a community much like the one she grew up in. Interestingly, during her internship she developed more lessons that focused on other cultures than any of the other student teachers in the suburban cluster. She was fortunate to be placed with a cooperating teacher who had a unique world perspective.

The cooperating teacher frequently shared examples of how her life has been enriched by her interactions with other cultures through her travels around the world and her cultural pursuits and hobbies. The sheltered student teacher was inspired by her cooperating teacher's interesting lifestyle. I believe as a result of her relationship with her cooperating teacher this student teacher will be more open to studying and interacting with other cultures. I know that she views multiculturalism more positively now than before her internship experience. I think over time her commitment to multiculturalism will grow as she develops and grows as a person and a teacher. Not all education students will be ready to do field work in urban schools during their program or be interested in taking courses on other cultures. Some may need a more subtle and psychologically safe approach to learning multiculturalism. Thus, teacher educators must be creative about reaching these students. It is also clear that younger students are more open to studying about other cultures than older students. Thus, it is crucial that teachers find more ways to expose elementary students to other cultures as early as possible. Perhaps if these white middle class student teachers had multicultural education in their elementary schools they would have been more open to field experiences in diverse settings as college students. This study revealed that there is much work that still needs to be done in suburban schools, as well as in urban schools. The type of work is different, but it leads to the same goal of accepting and valuing differences.

Conclusion

The results of this study revealed those student teachers who have had significant interactions and relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds as they were growing up were more open to working in urban

schools. Student teachers who have not had these experiences report positive feelings about working in urban schools if they have participated in an urban field experience. Student teachers who have chosen to do field studies in suburban schools are eager to develop and present multicultural lessons to their students. Overall, student teachers appear to be more accepting of working with children from other cultures and teaching about other cultures than what has been reported in previous studies on student teachers' views about multiculturalism and diversity (See Holm & Johnson, 1994).

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